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Mountains of Silence: Drone Metal Recordings as Mystical Texts

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Abstract: I use “drone metal” as a loose label for the music of various groups such as SunnO))), Earth and Sleep, involved in making sound at the limits of heavy metal while also drawing on classical and jazz avant-garde traditions, and world sacred musics. These musicians make frequent use of various religious, mystical or occult signs, sounds, and practices in their music, as well as drawing on spiritual themes in music. I suggest that these recordings are not only art about mysticism, but can be understood as mystical texts in themselves. I invoke the work of Michel de Certeau on mysticism, in which he locates “mystics” in “manners of speaking”: ways of using language against itself in order to gesture towards the unsayable. I outline how, in recordings, artwork, surrounding discussions, performance and listening rituals, similar features and practices can be discerned in drone metal texts as the codes of music are similarly strained in attempts at transcendence. Given that Certeau historically situates mystics at a time of epistemological transition from the authority of scripture to a modernist hermeneutics, I offer some speculation on the implications of hearing these contemporary drone metal mystical texts as noise in a contemporary transition to an economy of pure information signal.

Keywords: Drone Metal, Certeau, Mysticism

Introduction

This paper attempts to draw together the seemingly disparate traditions of 16th Century Christian mysticism and a somewhat underground subgenre of heavy metal, tracing in the latter the outline of characteristics that Michel de Certeau has discovered in the former. In contrast to the more oppositional stance toward religion often found elsewhere in metal, drone metal recordings frequently refer more positively to mysticism in lyrics, artwork and sound. Rather than a superficial or merely thematic use, I hope to show that drone metal recordings employ textual operations closely analogous to the “manners of speaking” Certeau reads in mystical texts. In this light, I suggest that, not merely artworks about religious traditions, drone metal recordings can be heard as mystical texts.

I situate this discussion in relation to other treatments of metal, religion and mysticism, and cultural theory, particularly Certeau’s work. While attempting to avoid the essentialism often present in the study of mysticism, I outline the textual characteristics that Certeau discovers in 16th century religious texts. Then, I introduce drone metal and discuss the linguistic, sonic and aesthetic aspects of drone metal which relate closely to Certeau’s typology. Finally, I explore the implications of hearing drone metal recordings as mystical texts, considering Certeau’s suggestion that 16th Century mystic writings were produced at a time of epistemological crisis and transition.

Studies

In academic literature, metal has at last begun to be considered in all its diversity and complexity. Deena Weinstein’s pioneering but broad picture of late 1980s metal *Heavy Metal* (1991), paved the way for other studies, notably Robert Walser’s *Power, Gender and Madness* (1993), and more recently, Keith Kahn-Harris’ *Extreme Metal* (2007) and Gerd Bayer’s edited volume *Heavy Metal in Britain* (2009). Several approaches have been taken: from Kahn-Harris’ subcultural studies perspective, to Harris Berger and Cornelia Fales’ technical assessment of heaviness (2005), to Andy Brown’s study of t-shirt buying (2009). Few scholars, though, have treated the intersections of religion and heavy metal despite religious themes having occupied many metal musicians from the genre’s earliest origins. Mark LeVine offers fascinating vignettes of metal

musicians and fans in *Heavy Metal Islam* (2008), though the book might be better titled ‘Heavy Metal in Islamic Countries and Israel,’ since religion is considered more as shorthand for a repressive social and political environment than as a symbolic, sonic or thematic resource. Marcus Moberg’s *Faster for the Master* (2009) gives insight into the negotiations inherent in forging an ‘alternative Christian identity’ in the Christian metal scene in Finland, but the proliferation of religious images, texts and sounds in so-called ‘secular’ metal remains understudied. The fascinating progression in black metal from Satanism to neopaganism has received more attention, though much of it polarised and sensationalist, largely due to connections with far-right politics and acts of spectacular violence in the Norwegian scene in the early 90s (Moynihan and Søderlind 1998; Massa 1999).

Another issue in metal studies is a lack of attention to the numerous subgenres (other than black metal). There are an enormous range of styles featuring related but often extremely specialised sounds, practices and surrounding cultures. Borders between subgenre classifications can be very sensitively policed, while hybrid styles spawn sub-subgenres (blackened thrash, grindcore, progressive war metal, for example). Earlier studies discuss the then nascent divisions in separate chapters, before returning to discuss metal as more-or-less homogenous. Even Kahn-Harris’ book, which specifically focuses on subgenres, classifies widely diverging styles (doom, death, black) under the umbrella of “extreme metal,” somewhat effacing each subgenre’s specific aesthetic. I am not aware of any published work focusing specifically on drone metal, despite the music receiving critical acclaim even beyond metal media.

Metal studies have tended to take a sociological or journalistic approach rather than engaging with critical and literary theory, except, again, for black metal (see Bogue 2007 on black metal and Deleuze; the journal *Black Metal Theory* ed. Masciandro, first issue 2010). This leads in many cases to a neglect of the sounds and structures of recordings and musical performance itself, in favour of descriptions of related behaviour, particularly of the transgressive kind. For this reason Michel de Certeau’s work is of invaluable assistance in approaching the religious aspects of drone metal recordings. Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) is well-known, with near-ubiquitous adoption of his distinction between guerilla ‘tactics’ and institutional ‘strategies’ (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2007, 55). Less well-known are his writings on the history of mysticism, despite their striking theories of language grounded in Freud, Lacan, Foucault and other key influences on French-language cultural theory, and despite an increasing interest in the religious implications in the subtleties of the later works of Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault for example (e.g. J. Smith 2006).

Mysticism Historical and Eternal

Though pretensions toward the eternal and universal abound in the classical study of mysticism, the construct is both geographically and historically bounded, having coalesced from various strands of orientalism and occultism in late 19th and early 20th century works of European and American theologians, anthropologists, psychologists and literary intellectuals. Influential writings by Rudolf Otto, William James, Evelyn Underhill, Mircea Eliade and others found in spiritual experience a revived authenticity offering the potential to ‘rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in the archaic societies’ (Eliade 1959, 13). Such suggestions created a tradition which had suddenly always been in existence, a corpus of texts constructing their own archaic origin and then proceeding to investigate its instances, as in Aldous Huxley’s anthology *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945). These studies risk homogenising diverse experiences, practices and textual productions under the umbrella of a posited essential “true core” of all world religion. This may even lead to claims that various instances of “mysticism” are in fact unrealised or degenerate manifestations of a certain valorised type: R.C. Zaehner, for example, apparently viewing descriptions of spiritual experience as “genuine” only if described in explicitly or plausibly Roman Catholic terms (1969, 50). Materialism and biochemical reductionism also posit this kind of foundation, as in for example, Huxley’s later ideas about the confluence of effects of mescaline, fasting and stained glass windows (2004).

More recent studies by Jeffrey Kripal and Don Cupitt move away from “experience” and locate mysticism in texts, both writers drawing on Certeau’s insistence on recognising historical and cultural specificity, while allowing that diverse texts and traditions may refer to related phenomena (Certeau 1992a, 13; Kripal 2007, 13; Cupitt 1998, 57). Cupitt argues that the writing of the text is itself the mystical experience, experience always already structured by language, thus departing from the traditional account of an individual experience anterior to description or communication. Kripal does not go as far, but does discern traces of writers’ mystical experience in their texts, thus binding together experience and text more closely; a reflexive mysticism certainly evident in writings such as, for example, the experimental poetics of Certeau’s ‘White Ecstasy’ (1997).

Michel de Certeau’s *Mystics*

Michel de Certeau (1925-1986), itinerant Jesuit theologian, historian, psychoanalyst and cultural theorist, was engaged with mysticism throughout his career. Certeau does not ignore or explain away the structuring particularities of texts, nor abandon the mystic’s claims of an originary experience. Instead, suggesting a quasi-scientific discipline of *mystics*, analogous to physics or mathematics (M. Smith 1992, x), he investigates the ways in which texts are made to speak of the absence which moves them to be written, compelled to use language differently, with heterogeneous tactics and operations grouped under the description ‘manners of speaking’ (1986, 81). Certeau hears echoes of mystics in art, literature, poetry, psychoanalysis, and historiography (1986, 80, 137, 150; 1992b, 2, 3, 295), diverse aesthetic currents and bodies of knowledge marked with the residues and resurgences of certain textual practices in different historical situations. Given Certeau’s frequent uses of musical metaphor (1984, 184; 1986, 83; 1992a, 17, 22, 295; 1992b, 36) it is not surprising that the strains of mystics can be heard in drone metal.

In mystical writings Certeau finds an investigation of the foundations of a body of knowledge from within that corpus, a questioning of the epistemological grounding of the church in Scripture, when the unitary authority of the Word had been lost in a proliferation of interpretation at the advent of Enlightenment rationalism. Mystic texts were those which had become separated from the institution, ‘an elsewhere that was not remote’ (1992b, 2), hinting at a secret or hidden knowledge that was a function of the estrangement of meaning from guaranteed truth. Texts were produced in the margins, in rural areas and foreign lands, in translation, by individuals dispossessed ‘in a world [...] coming apart’ (1987, 2, 5). The texts commented on and contributed to the undermining of the institution of the church, yet were themselves, to use Certeau’s metaphor, left stranded as the epistemological tide turned (1992b, 22).

This reflexive interrogation of foundations took place within texts, in uses and operations that pushed language beyond its own limits. Texts were a site in/from which writers attempted to indicate what was missing. Broken fragments of language were presented, not to recreate the shattered unity but to bear witness to the departure of guaranteed meaning in the ruins of the Word (1992a, 22). Words and grammatical structures were used in paradoxical, oxymoronic ways, focusing not on the possible referents of phrases like ‘furious quietude’, but using combinations of opposites as the ‘simplest [mystic] signifier’ (1995, 443). Through these operations, signifiers became opaque (1992b, 144): units and items of language were turned inward, presented adrift from signification. Mystical texts were produced in an ‘oscillation’ between hearing and speaking (1992b, 115), as if trying to capture the last echoes of a speech whose speaker had departed, to relay the recorded traces to others. In this period of transition and uncertainty, the body spoke, as in a prayer spoken through palms outstretched towards the sun, the correlative of an obsession with the relation of texts to bodies and the mark of a search for a restored foundation (1992a, 22).

A kind of semantic prestidigitation substituted one secret for another: in their linguistic contortions the texts promised an esoterically encoded meaning, while hiding in plain sight the secret that language could no longer support unified meaning. Certeau traces this occultism in an analysis of Hieronymous Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c.1480-1505). The painting

suggests pathways, but pathways which do not lead viewers to a final destination, rather to a walking of the pathways; pathways in which to lose oneself rather than to find a meaning: an anti-conclusion arrived at through Certeau's own itinerant erudition. The secret, obvious to those who had seen it ('I only address those who...', says the mystic' (1986, 91)) but infuriating to those who still sought some hidden treasure, led to a certain exclusivity, and as a result, accusations of heresy. Texts denied themselves in favour of other texts, endlessly locating truth elsewhere, writing an escape in each apophatic instance. The insistently repeated "not here, but there" indicated a categorical "not here," an ever-present absence of truth combined with a "perhaps *there*" which led the pilgrims onward. The texts Certeau cites speak of wanderings, peregrinations, and then themselves embark upon circuitous routes, journeys of dissemination, translation, copying and dispersal. In gesturing toward a lost origin they themselves lose their origins; in following texts until their origins are lost, Certeau's own writing becomes lost (1992b, 1, 215, 223). Through these operations and procedures, mystic texts attempted to communicate a transcendence of the codes of communication, using a 'tormented language to say what it did not say, the sculpture of the tactics of which they were the instruments' (1992b, 141).

Drone metal

Drone metal recordings present expanses of distorted guitar noise at the borders of formlessness, a radical departure from the progressively more intricate song structure in the heavy metal tradition within which they originate. Drone metal musicians in the 1990s such as Earth, taking their name from an early incarnation of metal originators Black Sabbath, returned to that band's style with a noisy, impure purism, forsaking the virtuosic pretensions to high art in the developing complexity and speed of mainstream metal (Walser 1993, 14). Earth's groundbreaking monotonous 2: *Special Low Frequency Version* (1993), with its three droning feedback epics matching the minimalist but expansive cover photograph, was highly influential. The group's subsequent recordings moved toward more conventional song structure (1995a; 1996) before turning to a deeply meditative approach which retained the extensive repetition of bass-heavy riffs, slow tempos and long, textured pieces, but largely abandoned distortion in favour of a more acoustic drone sound (2005a; 2008; 2011; 2012).

While much of metal was concerning itself with quasi-classical harmonics and exacting technical skill, Sleep remained tightly bound to Black Sabbath's rough signature style for two albums, before in 1995 moving far beyond this somewhat derivative sound in recording *Dopesmoker*, an hour-long, crushingly heavy opus to sacramental marijuana consumption rendered in the mystical language of Middle-Eastern pilgrimage. Testing not only aesthetic limits, but record company patience, the band split, spawning a number of other projects, most notably Om, who furthered the drone aesthetic to include a more explicit emphasis on meditation and mantra (2005; 2006; 2009; 2012).

SunnO))), playing on the name of the influential Earth as well as the name of an amplifier manufacturer, have explored the extreme low, slow aesthetic of drone metal while extending it to incorporate spoken word contributions, choirs and horn sections, while remaining committed to the amplified noise with which the genre resonates (2009).

Mysticism in Drone Metal

Drone metal has consistently engaged with mystical traditions, in artwork, lyrics, performance practices, textual references and sound. Since Black Sabbath's crucifixes and Led Zeppelin's occult symbology, metal in general has retained a fascination with religion. Despite some exceptions (notably Black Sabbath's 'After Forever' (1971), and early doom group Trouble), 'a critical stance toward religion, especially Christianity, is a common feature of metal culture on a general level' (Moberg 2009, 122, 244; see also Metal 2010). This critical stance is often based in militant atheism (see, for example, death metal band Deicide), or in Satanism (variously conceived: as publicity (Christe 2003, 116); as rebellion (Weinstein 1991, 54); as a source of

power in mystery (Walser 1993, 151); or simply as an alternative religious choice (Gaines 1998, 189)). More recently, metal critique of (Judaeo-)Christianity has emerged from a revivalist pagan perspective, particularly in black metal (see Moynihan and Søderlind 1998; Vikernes 2011).

Drone metal consistently offers a more contemplative and balanced perspective of religion, as well as displaying a sustained interest in religions other than Christianity. In artwork, language, practice, instrumentation and sound, musicians engage with a far wider range of religious themes and traditions than in much metal. Sleep and later offshoot Om, for example, incorporate sounds and symbols of Judaism, Rastafari, Hinduism, Buddhism, paganism and ancient Egyptian beliefs. When even evangelical Christian metal adopts the provocative gory imagery prevalent across the metal milieu (see Mortification, Ancestor, Horde covers in Metal 2010), the title and artwork of Om's *God is Good* (2009), featuring a Byzantine-style image of an angel, mark drone metal as a special case in the intersections of metal and religion.

Manners of Speaking

In the same way that mystical traces may be discerned in the writings of authors who ostensibly merely study the mystical experiences and texts of others (Kripal 2007, 108), drone metal recordings can themselves be heard as mystical texts. In titles and lyrics, drone metal displays the kinds of paradoxical or contradictory forms of language that Certeau describes as “manners of speaking.” Earth offer parallels and contrasts in the titles of their recent *Angels of Darkness, Demons of Light* records (2011; 2012; SunnO))) hint at the extremes of language in employing ‘Megszentségteleníthetetlenségeskedéseitekért,’ the longest word in Hungarian as a song title while testing the conventions of band names with odd punctuation; Sleep employ neologisms such as ‘riffian’ and ‘marijuanaut,’ suggesting a religion of metal involving sacramental drug consumption while testing the boundaries of language (2012).

Reviews of records and performances also display religiously-inflected oxymorons and contrasts: *Monoliths & Dimensions* is a ‘chapel of apprehension’ (Ravna 2009, n.p.), in which a ‘satanic sermon’ is delivered (Satanic Shoe 2011, n.p), leaving one reviewer ‘crushed and elated simultaneously’ (UntilYouReform 2009, n.p.), this last description also suggesting the intense physicality of experiencing the record. A review of Earth’s *Angels and Demons Volume 2* states ‘Perhaps it’s ironic or nitpicking to talk about language in an album that’s entirely instrumental, but titles and themes are an important part in how Earth sets the mood for a record or even a single track’ (TheObelisk 2012, n.p), a retreat from language unexpectedly heightening the resonance of the few words that remain. Drone metal recordings are often described in reviews and listener discussions as cinematic, operatic or featuring other visual aspects: SunnO)))) ‘are not merely musicians, they are like film-directors, bringing out visual elements through their work’ according to reviewer Ailo Ravna (2009, n.p.), the band ‘painting vast lush scenes’ in sound (UntilYouReform 2009, n.p.), while Isaac Wastman describes Earth’s music in cinematic terms (2012, n.p). Frequent appeals to a visual language betray both incompleteness and excess, sound appearing to need, but also suggest, moving images; the sound ‘overflows its designated space’ (Certeau 1992b, 3).

Drone metal “manners of speaking” are not limited to verbal language, but occur in sound, operating on the sonic foundation of their musical tradition, similar to those enacted on the written corpus that was the foundation of the mystic’s Christian tradition. Acknowledging that particular eras privilege certain sensations, Certeau allows for a wider conception of language which refers ‘not only to the syntax and vocabulary of a certain tongue—that is to say, the combination of apertures and closures that determine the possibilities of comprehension—but also to the codes of recognition, the organization of the imaginary, the sensory hierarchizations in which smell or sight predominate, the fixed constellation of institutions of doctrinal references, and so forth’ (1992a, 21). If ‘paper has long since lost its power to resurrect the dead’ (1996, 441), then perhaps mystic texts may now be written (distributed, disseminated, interpreted, used) in recorded sound.

Drones themselves can have religious connotation or function, unchanging sound representing or perhaps instantiating transcendental reality; sound eternal and universal yet experienced in local specificity. Various other sounds used in drone metal are also linked to religion, such as choirs, chants, and even horns referencing a transcendental spirituality in jazz. The key sound of heavy metal texts, though, is the guitar riff, the semantic unit of the metal song; customarily repeated and related to other riffs to make up the structure of a song. Given this loose comparison with the grammar of a language, the drone metal riff, far slower and repeated far more extensively than the conventional metal riff, resembles religious forms of language like prayer, chanting or recitation. This can be incomprehensible if listening within a paradigm of metal semantics predicated on progression ('I detect no evolution in the sound of Dopesmoker, being stuck on the same riffs for large amounts of time,' in a review entitled 'Overrated'; The Ghoul 2008, n.p), but these practices fit Certeau's description of a turn to the materiality of a sign over any content or structured meaning, while at the same time drawing accusations of heresy akin to those levelled at the 'new' and therefore suspect mystics in the 16th century (Certeau 1992b, 18). The chosen moniker for the Sleep bandmates subsequent project, Om, is telling: a word whose meaning is its own sound (Boon 2002, 65).

This focus on materiality is further emphasised in an obsession with heaviness. Since heavy metal was so named there has been a concern with "heaviness," despite the concept's notorious evasion of concrete definition. Heaviness has been taken to mean speed, slowness, technical skill, lack of technical skill, various aspects of recording technology, amount of distortion or feedback, and any number of other formulations based on timbre, by listeners, musicians, critics and academics (Berger and Fales 2005). While assertions of heaviness may support a listener's claims of taste and ability to enjoy/withstand extreme music, the superlative heaviness of drone metal is consistently mentioned ('knee wilting heaviness' in one review (Thomas 2012, n.p.)), connoting the very materiality of sound and physical experience that suggests Certeau's opaque signs (1992b, 144) in the drone metal aesthetic.

Medium and Experience

Symbolic power shifts from the electric guitar to the amplifier. SunnO))) are named after an amplifier manufacturer, a sublimation of a creative identity into the medium of transmission. Preoccupation with mediation is shared by Earth, titling live albums *Sunn Amps and Smashed Guitars* (1995b) and *Radio Live* (2009), and Sleep requesting particular amplifiers in the sleeve notes of *Holy Mountain* (1992). When sculptor Banks Violette was invited to collaborate with SunnO))), it was the band's amplifiers that the artist chose to form the basis of a cast in resin and salt (SunnO))) 2007). Amplifiers are set up as altars, sometimes even in churches. Amplification in itself is the aim, rather than amplification of any particular note, tone, message, or meaning; an impulse analogous to mystical writers attempting to 'mark the workings of language when it is spoken' (Certeau 1996, 30), illuminating the material medium of language over any semantic content.

The wanderings cited by Certeau, and discernable in his own texts, are also a strong theme in drone metal. The musicians in Sleep have long been fascinated with sacred places, such as the *Holy Mountain* of their second record (1992a). The lyrics of *Dopesmoker* (2003; 2012; otherwise known as *Jerusalem*, 1999) present pilgrimage and travel, together with that of marijuana consumption, as tropes for spiritual experience. The implication might be that the experience of listening to the entire album is an arduous journey, with attendant spiritual effects and altered perception similar to those that might be gained by, for example, climbing a holy mountain. The wandering pilgrim of lyrical themes, and also the touring musician, both fit Certeau's description of itinerant mystics, texts, and lives marked by continuous departure (1992b, 14). Earth's *Angels...Vol.2* is a 'meditative, smoked out tour of an Eastern cowboy town from Hell' (Wastman 2012, n.p.) and many other reviews evoke the trope of a journey (see Ravna 2009; Grumple 2012; McKibbin 2012; and Mikeald 2009), even when discussing records not explicitly related to sacred travel or places. Ideas of travel are particularly striking when combined with descriptions

that highlight the slowness or even stasis of sound: ‘This first riff is like the beginning of a journey, a slow and at first appearance painful ride through the desert’ (Why 2008, n.p.). These indications often occur in close proximity to descriptions or recommendations of drug consumption in conjunction with listening to drone metal. Promotional and album-sleeve photographs of SunnO))) show the group on a mountain with guitars shouldered, or shrouded in robes atop the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, a mountain created from earth and stone marking the centre of the Aztec world (sleeve notes, 2009) These aspects all suggest repetitive sound used to create ritual space, the sacrality of the *Holy Mountain* produced by the exertions of the sacred journey undertaken in order to reach it.

Sacred Texts

Mystical texts from various traditions appear in drone metal. Persian text *Conference of the Birds* lends its name to an Om record (2006); SunnO))) incorporate a recitation of Vedic text the *Srimad Bhagavatam* on *White2* (2004); the lyrics of *Dopesmoker* reference Old Testament places and times, integrate phrases from other traditions (such as ‘groundation,’ more commonly associated with Rastafari, as well as ‘riffian’ and ‘Hashishian’ suggesting religions of metal and marijuana). Earth, their sparse use of language matching sparse sonic arrangements, quote an obscure riddle from the Old Testament in *The Bees Made Honey in the Lion’s Skull* (2008), and William Blake’s visionary *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in the subtitle to the album *Hex: or, Printing in the Infernal Method* (Earth 2005a; Blake 1988, 39). In the poem, the line chosen by Earth immediately precedes one describing the “doors of perception,” claimed by Aldous Huxley for the title of his essay on mescaline-induced psychedelic experience (1988), thus obliquely drawing on earlier conceptual links between drugs and mysticism, extended to music by Jim Morrison’s Doors in the 1960s.

Drone metal also turns to the sacred texts of metal: Black Sabbath’s early 1970s LPs: *Black Sabbath*, *Paranoid*, *Master of Reality* and *Volume 4*, which have been described by Julian Cope as the four gospels of a heavy metal religion as followed by the bandmembers of Sleep, explicitly drawing out the religion of metal suggested in the lyrics (Cope 2004). Earth are named after an early incarnation of Black Sabbath, and Sleep paid tribute by copying the sound, title and image of *Volume 4* for their EP *Volume 2* (1992b). SunnO))) pay respects more to the black metal subgenre, in performing with Attila Csihar of seminal band Mayhem, and covering/naming songs after early Swedish black metal band Bathory (‘Báthory Erzsébet,’ 2005). Despite the sense of an orthodox focus on the essences of metal, drone metal can be seen as heretical, according to some guardians of metal tradition (Kantor 2012). Earth commit further transgression by breaking the codes of the transgressive subgenre they created, with their radical departure from distortion in favour of a country-drone use of reverb and more acoustic resonance (2005a).

The limits of the format of distribution are also tested, with lengthy pieces approaching the boundaries of what could fit on CD (Earth’s 2005b *Living in the Gleam of an Unsheathed Sword*, Sleep’s *Dopesmoker*), and certainly testing the limits of what record companies considered acceptable. Earth’s most recent records exceed limits: *Angels of Darkness, Demons of Light Volume 1* and *Volume 2* were both released on double vinyl, effectively creating a single work which stretches over eight sides of vinyl. Descriptions of recordings are often accompanied with a disclaimer that witnessing the group perform live is the real experience, situating the recordings, after Certeau, as texts between hearing and production (1992b, 115). Live shows are often supplemented with smoke machines, robes and other ritual accoutrements, and performances are seen as the epitome of experiencing drone metal, following the privileging of “experience” (over experience of writing or reading texts) in studies of mysticism.

Conclusion

Through comparison with Michel de Certeau’s analysis of 16th Century mystics, I hope to have hinted at the deep mystical currents in drone metal recordings, outlining the relation between

sound and structure of drone metal and religious titles, artwork, lyrics, and language. Present both in the texts Certeau details, and in the recordings of SunnO))), Sleep, Earth and others, are many features of mystical writing: a gesturing towards an ineffable foundation; a testing of the limits of the format and medium of their own production and distribution; an interrogation of their own place of speaking; a turn toward other mystic texts while disclaiming their own; a simultaneously orthodox and heretical return to a canon; a shift from the speaking subject to preoccupation with mediation and transmission; a focus on the opacity of symbols; a sense of wandering, pilgrimage, or tribulation; and an esoteric meaning, eluding interpretation by encoding no message above the experience of material signs.

Certeau suggests a further characteristic of mystical texts. In *The Mystic Fable*, he suggests that mystics may resurface, in differing guises, at periods of epistemological transition (1992b, 11-14). In the 16th Century, this was the loss of faith in the Word in an explosion of interpretation related to a proliferation of printed texts and a fragmenting of the church. Drone metal's mystical texts, then, may herald a similar change. Jacques Attali, in *Noise: the Political Economy of Music* (1985), describes a society in which the culture industry routinely finds ways to 'deritualize a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalize its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning.' (1985, 5). Like the 16th Century mystic texts which marked the twilight of a particular structuring foundation of meaning, in a 21st Century economy of information-transfer (that Marshall McLuhan predicted would presage an immersive, auditory culture (1999, 107)), drone metal returns to a material form of inscription in lavishly presented records, just as music (and everything else) is electronically encoded, encrypted, intangible, online. Appealing to corporeal experience of noise, these contemporary mystical texts present the noise of physicality against the signal of transferred information.

The William Blake reference in Earth's album title is telling; a prophecy written at the advent of the Industrial Revolution, of a hellish yet revelatory technology which could distribute texts that dissolve illusions and induce physical experience of the sacred: 'the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid' (Blake 1988, 39). Here Blake relates the processes of creating a physical, material text with revelatory poetic interpretation (Kripal 2009, 32), and, as for the engraving of Blake's visions into texts, so too the inscription of revelatory drone metal sound into vinyl unites mystical text and experience. Just as Certeau the theologian relates a fable of texts in search of the foundational absence of God, drone metal offers noise which evokes its own impossible foundation. Drone metal suggests silence even in its cacophonous noise, departing beyond music to seek its opposite, toward which it gestures while facing away. If God is the reason, the guarantee and the impossible limit of a mystic theology, the 'index that pointed to the failure of all signs' (Certeau 1992b, 160), then drone metal's mystic noise is founded on an absence of sound which determines all sound. In these contemporary mystical texts, 'the foundation of mystic science is indeed that mountain of silence' (1992b, 134).

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